

What Is a Sacrament?

Sacraments: An Overview

“The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.... They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1131

What Is a Sacrament?

The understanding of sacraments defined by the comes out of centuries of understanding and Tradition dating back to the writings of the early Church fathers and continuing through the teachings of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and most recently the Second Vatican Council in the twentieth century. Roman Catholics believe that the visible signs, symbols, and rituals that constitute a sacrament point to the invisible reality of God’s abiding and salvific presence in his Church, the Body of Christ. Through the celebration of sacraments, we become aware of the mystery of the presence and action of the God we cannot see. In fact, early Church fathers used the Greek word *mysterion*, which means “mystery,” to describe sacraments. While sacraments do not exhaust God’s mystery, they allow us through signs and words to draw near to it and be transformed by it.

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Sacraments and Covenant

In Latin the word for sacrament is *sacramentum*, which means “oath.” In classical antiquity referred to symbolic gestures that committed people to future action. A soldier’s declaration of allegiance was a *sacramentum*. When two persons made an agreement, the was a sum of money set aside and forfeited by

anyone who failed to keep his or her part of the bargain. The Christian description of sacrament took shape in this cultural context, which helps us to understand that sacraments are inextricably linked with faithfulness and covenant. Sacraments are effective signs of God’s fidelity and love, and a pledge of our future inheritance. We call them “the sacraments of the New Covenant” (1091).

Christian Sacraments

The most visible sign of God’s presence in human history is Jesus Christ. Through the welcoming, healing, and forgiving words and actions of his life, especially his death and Resurrection, we see the institution of Christian sacraments. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, sacraments

remember and make present his life in the Body of Christ, the Church. They affirm and complete the natural signs of God’s presence in creation and the signs that belonged to God’s people in preceding ages. The sacraments sustain the Church and give her life. In modern times, the Second Vatican Council affirmed the great importance of the sacraments in Christian life.

“The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify people, to build up the Body of Christ, and, finally, to worship God. Because they are signs they also [instruct]” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 59). The Council went on to say that sacraments “nourish, strengthen, and express” faith, and lead to a life of charity (59).

Sacraments not only reveal the presence and action of God, they are also an effective means by which grace—God’s own life—is given to us to be shared with others. In a certain sense, the Church is also a sacrament, because the Church is a sign of God’s presence and an instrument of grace in the world (CCC, 738, 849).

Seven Sacraments

The Catholic Church teaches that each of the sacraments was instituted by Christ and is rooted in his words and deeds. Naming, enumerating, and defining the sacraments was a gradual process, however. By the thirteenth century the Catholic Church had identified seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist,

Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Marriage. This list remains unchanged.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* groups the seven sacraments into three subcategories. Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are called Sacraments of Initiation. Penance and Anointing of the Sick are identified as Sacraments of Reconciliation and Healing.

Finally, Marriage and Holy Orders are both considered Sacraments in Service to Communion. Such groupings help to illustrate how all the sacraments work together to build up the Body of Christ.

Catholics believe that the sacraments effect what they symbolize, when those who receive them are open to God’s grace. Preparation, catechesis, and the full use of the sacramental symbols help us to achieve that openness and experience the power of the sacraments. Sacraments are the work of God, not simply

a human custom or ceremony. Care in preparing for and celebrating the sacraments opens the way for their fruitful reception.

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For Reflection

- What experiences of sacraments have helped you become more aware of God’s presence?